An affective approach to climate change adaptation

Martin Mulligan

Climate change is not a 'problem to be solved'
but a 'condition in which we are enmeshed'

Mike Hulme, 2009

At the end of November 2011, Australian news media reported that the year was shaping up to be the eleventh hottest on record globally and the hottest in which the La Nina effect was known to be cooling water temperatures in eastern and central parts of the Pacific Ocean.[1] This rather alarming piece of information dropped out of the news cycle in less than a day with little or no comment. What does this mean? Have we become immune to such alarming news about global warming? Have we become more cynical about what scientists are telling us, especially at a time when we had experienced wet and cool Spring weather in south-eastern Australia? Do we simply hope that the scientists might still be wrong about climate change? Have we concluded that Australia is rather impotent when it comes to climate change action? Is the very idea of global climate change so overwhelming that we would rather bury our heads in the sand, maybe on a beach during blissfully lazy summer holidays? Or have Australian media outlets reached the conclusion that scientific predictions about the onset of climate change are no longer very 'newsworthy'?

No doubt the muted response to the alarming news reflects a mix of these possibilities. The relative failure of global gatherings intended to negotiate new global agreements on climate change responses—from Copenhagen onwards—has increased our pessimism. The cynical and divisive political debate on the Gillard government's efforts to 'put a price on carbon' has dampened our enthusiasm for what Australia might be able to do. Australian 'news' media outlets seem to be more interested in the theatrics of politics than the content of political debate and this is making people more cynical about politics in general. Those who are pushing strongly for more adequate Australian policies on global climate change seem to be preoccupied with the formulation of public policy at a national level and the ongoing debate continues be dominated by the science of climate change.

In Australia we have not yet taken on board key ideas from the important book by UK-based climate change researcher Mike Hulme[2], especially when he points out that it is a misunderstanding of science to think that it can give us an 'answer' and that it is time to shift from thinking of climate change as 'problem to solve' in order to see it as a 'condition in which we are enmeshed'.[3] While this might seem like a pessimistic approach, Hulme argues that it can enable us to see climate change as being an 'imaginative resource' that can enable us to think much more deeply about our history, culture and ways of living. Hulme's book offers us a way to get beyond the big problem of denial—whether it takes the form of scepticism or avoidance. But it is only an invitation to take a different approach to the climate change challenge; the hard work on this is yet to be done.

Hulme is certainly not alone in suggesting that we must turn our attention to the 'affective dimensions' of climate change adaptation.[4] However, the work that is yet to be done is to forge a link between affect and agency, with agency understood as a *capacity to act* at all levels ranging from individuals and households to the global 'community' *without losing hope*.

Ways of researching 'affective dimensions'

The National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) in Australia is one agency that has issued a call for more research on the 'affective dimensions' of climate change adaptation.[5] This has already resulted in a significant opinion survey conducted by NCCARF-affiliated psychologist Joe Reser and his associates that was published in 2011.[6] At a time when pubic opinion surveys published by polling agencies were suggesting a decline in public support for the government's proposed carbon tax, the survey conducted by Reser et al suggested that 66.3 per cent of the respondents had either a 'fairly high' or 'very high' level of concern about climate change impacts and 54 per cent felt that climate change impacts are already being felt in Australia. Even more surprisingly, only 1.2 per cent of those surveyed across Australia expressed support for the views being promoted by climate change sceptics. Talking about the results of the survey to an audience at RMIT University in October 2011, Reser said the survey had been carefully designed and implemented in order to avoid the kind of shallow and passive responses that people commonly give in quickfire telephone polls. It seems, therefore, that there is a higher level of awareness and concern than opinion polls are suggesting and yet the survey conducted by Reser *et al* suggested that people are feeling that their own levels of concern are not being validated by the public debate on the topic; resulting in a disconnect between felt concerns and the way the topic is being discussed publicly.

In one sense the survey conducted by Reser *et al* is encouraging for those who want to see more resolute action on climate change in Australia. However, it does not offer any insights on how we might be able to turn concern into agency. More work on the psychology of how people

are feeling can only takes us a little way down the path towards more effective adaptation. Yet surveys are popular among those who favour a scientific approach to climate change adaptation. When the author applied for an NCCARF grant in 2011 to explore the 'affective dimensions' of climate change adaptation through community-based art interventions, the application was rejected because NCCARF's 'Science Review Panel' found the methodology unconvincing. In other words the project could not even get past the first scientific 'filter' and it seems that organisations like NCCARF are not yet open to the kind of research advocated by Hulme and the Tyndall Centre (for climate change research), of which Hulme was the inaugural director. Australia is lagging behind Europe in ways of engaging with climate change adaptation.

Putting affect and cognition together

Traditionally psychologists have thought of 'cognition' and 'affect' as belonging to different 'domains' of consciousness. However, scholars of literature have long noted[7] that fiction writers deliberately blur any such distinction because they are deeply interested in the ways in which affect influences consciousness. Humanities scholar Jonathan Lamb has suggested that we need to put affect and cognition together in order to understand the ways in which great writers—J.M. Coetzee, in this case—help us to think more deeply about our own felt experiences by being able to imagine, and have empathy for, challenging experiences of other, fictionalised, humans.[8] J.M. Coetzee's writing, and his reflections on his own writing, are particularly instructive here because they suggest that affective cognition can enable us to develop a level of empathy for the felt experiences of animals as well as other humans.

Fiction writers often take us into the depths of human despair where we can have a vicarious experience of challenges that we hope we may never have to confront personally. Of course, those who manage to survive the worst have inevitably learnt something about personal resilience in the process and in some cases they have developed a well-tested sense of hope for the future. This is pertinent to the challenges of climate change because it is foolish to think that we can simply adjust to increasing levels of climate-related risk and uncertainty without having to confront loss and despair, either personally or within our communities. We cannot simply design our way to better ways of living and a capacity to first imagine and then grapple imaginatively with despair can help us better prepare for the challenges that lie ahead. We might, for example, be able to experience a disaster such as the Black Saturday bushfires vicariously so that we are both more determined to reduce the risk of such disasters and have a better understanding of how we might cope. Given that global climate change will be with us for several generations at least, we need to be able to regularly contemplate the depths of despair in order to think about the shafts of light that might illuminate a pathway back to hope and resilience.

Jacques Derrida used literary references[9] to highlight the occurrence of 'aporias', when meaning is deadlocked in the stand-off between binary opposites. While the term 'aporia' is generally used to refer to a deadlock of 'undecideability', Derrida was interested in moments when a clash of meanings might allow the impossible to become possible. Global climate change presents itself as a 'wicked problem' that seems impossible to resolve. However, we might find some ways through the impasse by seeking out the aporias in which the impossible become possible; and these are often the moments that attract the interest of poets, writers and other artists. This is not the easy road because aporias are an uncomfortable mix of crisis and opportunity. However, it may be the road we have to travel.

Embodied and emplaced encounters

Global climate change is the ultimate 'wicked problem' of our age because it is a global phenomenon of enormous duration and yet we experience both climate and climate variability at a local level. Climate change becomes more real as we begin to imagine what it will feel like and recent natural disasters in Australia—ranging from Black Saturday in Victoria to extensive flooding in Queensland in early 2011—are giving us glimpses of what might lie ahead. Of course, we need to keep in mind the important distinction between climate and weather, yet more Australians are having embodied experiences of what increasing climate variability *feels* like and other Australians can identify more easily with this experience than with the experiences of people experiencing record levels of flooding in countries such as Thailand and Pakistan.

To a significant extent, local communities in Australia are less vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters than local communities in the 'global south' (for want of a better term). Australia clearly has more resources than most to help disaster-affected communities recover from disaster and to prepare for any future disasters. Global climate change calls on us to be more willing to help damaged and vulnerable communities in all parts of the world and we need deeper empathy for what they face. Fortunately, advances in communication technologies enable us to visualise the felt experience of disasters elsewhere in the world and images can play a critical role in enabling people to imagine what others are experiencing.

Furthermore, it is not just a matter of imagining what other humans might be experiencing or facing because images can help us imagine what climate change means for other living creatures even when they are far removed from us. One of the most compelling images related to global climate change is that of polar bears clinging to shrinking chunks of ice floating in big expanses of warming seas. That is an image that sticks in the brain and communicates much about what global climate change means. The importance of visual images—representing both human and non-human experience—demonstrates that visual artists, as much as fiction writers,

have a big role to play in helping us imagine what climate change will look and feel like going forward.

Global inequities remind us that we need globally co-ordinated responses to the huge challenges of climate change. Australia must play its part and maybe even set a good example in this regard. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that our possibilities for taking action in order to reduce our negative contributions to climate change are shaped significantly by local realities. Most people in Australia need to find ways to reduce wasteful consumption and also reduce our dependence on forms of transport and energy that are driven by fossil fuels. This implies a need for many of us to live more locally than we have and to learn more about local resources and systems that can help us live more sustainably. Tim Ingold is the latest in a long line of writers who have advocated a kind of 'reinhabitation' of the world by developing a stronger and more fulfilling sense of the places in which we dwell.[10] Australian writer John Cameron has argued[11] that the challenge of sustainability can be framed more positively by imaging ways to create a 'place responsive society' in a land where ecological ignorance has been particularly pronounced. 'Reinhabitation' and 'place responsiveness' can give us new ways of engaging with climate change as a local—as well as global—phenomenon and a greater focus on embodied experience and place can help to relate adaptation policies to what can be more easily known and imagined.

Practices of resilience and the creation of community

An emphasis on embodied and emplaced experience should not imply that we need to do less to influence public policy for climate change adaptation at national or global levels. Rather it is an argument for broadening the base for climate change action by using a greater diversity of ways to engage people with the challenges. While we need to overcome denial by enabling people to better imagine what the future might hold we also need to help people identify practices of resilience and adaptation that they can implement personally and at the level of households and local communities. As Gerard Delanty has usefully pointed out[12] a sense of community barely exists within contemporary societies unless it is 'wilfully constructed' and even then narrow and divisive projections of community identity need to be contested to avoid increasing levels of division and conflict. We can all participate in the creation of community by imagining and enacting practices of resilience that can make us think more consciously about our relationships with other people and with the non-human 'lifeworlds' within which we dwell.

While local becomes more important we also need to remember that all of us can participate in a multitude of communities and networks that can range from the local to the global. In general we have more choice about the 'virtual' communities that we might belong to compared to the community of people who coexist in certain places or neighbourhoods. However, even at the local level a sense of community is created by communication and the

expansion of communication technologies enables us to participate more actively in a wide range of communicative communities. We can create communities at all levels from the local to the global by talking about what climate change means, what it feels like and what we can all do to imagine and enact practices of resilience. Digital media enables us to communicate by sharing visual images as well as words and we can combine image and word to better communicate embodied and emplaced experience. Social media open up new opportunities for creating community around affective responses to climate change.

In suggesting that we need to tip the balance somewhat from science to art in imaging how we might learn to live with climate change, I am not suggesting that we should turn our back on climate science. Far from it; science, we must remember, has brought us a certain distance in having the kind of cognition about global climate change which now prevails. However, we now need to turn to affective cognition to get beyond the limits of scientific discourse and this is where art comes to the fore.

It might seem odd to turn to the eighteenth century Romantic English poet William Wordsworth for inspiration about how we can better engage with climate change adaptation in Australia today. However, he lived at a time when empirical science was fast emerging as the dominant 'secular religion' of our age and he urged us to retain a poetic sensitivity to the world around us:

Sweet is the lore which nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mishapes the beauteous forms of things
—We murder to dissect.

Enough of science, and of art;
Close up these barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

[From *The Tables Turned,* 1798]

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Endnotes

1. Based on reports released by the national weather service in the UK.
2. Mike Hulme 2009, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press.
3. Hulme 2009, p. 364.
4. Note, for example, the body of work of climate change adaptation by Neil Adger and recent works by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck.
5. National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF), *National Climate Change Adaptation Research Plan: Social, Economic and Institutional Dimensions,* NCCARF, Brisbane, 2010.
6. Joseph P. Reser, Nick Pidgeon, Alexa Spence, Graham Bradley, A. Ian Glendon and Michael Ellul, P*ublic Risk Perceptions, Understandings, and Responses to Climate Change in Australia and Great Britain: Interim Report*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Griffith University, Brisbane, 2011.
7. See, for example, Susan H. McLeod, 'The Affective Domain and the Writing Process: Working Definitions', *JAC: Rhetoric, Writing, Culture and Politics,* vol. 11, (1), 1991.
8. Jonathan Lamb, '"The true words at last from the mind in ruins": J.M. Coetzee and Realism' in Graham Bradshaw and Michael Neill, eds, *J.M. Coetzee's Austerities*, Ashgate, UK, 2010.
9. Referring, for example, to a poem by William Butler Yeats, called Among School Children' which includes the lines 'How can we know the dancer from the dance'.
10. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Routledge, London, 2011.
11. John Cameron, 'Introduction' in J. Cameron, ed., *Changing Places: Re-Imagining Australia*, Longueville Books, Sydney, 2003.
12. Gerard Delanty, *Community,* Routledge, London and New York, 2003.